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ABSTRACT

The first of five booklets on attitudinal barriers toward disabled people examines five common myths and presents five scenes demonstrating attitudinal barriers toward blind, deaf, and physically disabled persons. The booklet concludes with suggested actions when meeting a disabled person (such as talking directly to the person rather than to an accompanying person) and for general advocacy (such as encouraging community groups to have programs about disabled persons). (CL)

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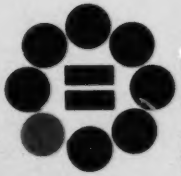
THE INVISIBLE BATTLE

Attitudes Toward Disability



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, a lot of attention has been addressed to the rights of disabled people. Through legislation and the efforts of many consumer groups, persons with disabilities have finally been recognized as valuable and equal members of society. Ramps are going up, doorways are being widened, and affirmative action is being taken. The physical barriers are coming down—slowly, but surely.

But what of the invisible barriers that still stand in the way of disabled citizens: the negative attitudes still held by many individuals? These attitudes underly the resistance which is voiced by those who reject the importance of independent, dignified life-styles for disabled citizens. The attitudes may arise from fear or simple lack of knowledge about disability. In spite of good intentions and adequate information, negative stereotyping still occurs (e.g., telethons, public service announcements on television). Often, attitudinal barriers go unrecognized.

This booklet is an introduction to the subject of attitudinal barriers: what they are, how to recognize them, and what you can do about them. We hope it will be helpful in breaking down the invisible barriers encountered by disabled citizens.

MYTH:

Disability is a constantly frustrating tragedy. Disabled people are courageous, brave and inspirational by being able to overcome their handicaps.

FACT:

Disability is an inconvenience. Most disabled people do not sit around and ponder their disability all the time. They simply carry on their lives as normally as they can. Individuals with disabilities cannot be stereotyped any more than can other minority groups. Each person is an individual personality and, as such, each disabled person will deal with his or her disability differently.

MYTH:

All disabled people are handicapped and/or crippled.

FACT:

The terms "disabled," "handicapped," and "crippled" are often used interchangeably. In fact, the latter two terms carry negative connotations, indicating that a disability prevents someone from being a fully-functioning member of society. A disability does not always present a handicap; rather it often only means that a disabled person may do something a little differently from a nondisabled person, but with the same result and with equal participation.

MYTH:

Able-bodied people have an obligation to take care of disabled people.

FACT:

Some disabilities may require a level of dependency upon other persons. In such cases, the disabled person will usually ask for help—as we all do now and again. But common courtesy and good sense dictate when and where help is needed. Nondisabled people have no intrinsic paternalistic duty to give pity, charity or extraordinary assistance to persons with disabilities.

MYTH:

Disabled people lead totally different lives than others do.

FACT:

Approximately 40 million US citizens have physical or mental disabilities. Most disabled people living at home occupy their time just like you. They go to work, go shopping, go out to dinner, raise families, and pay taxes. Chances are good that when you meet a disabled person you will discover several similar interests.

WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."

FIVE SCENES

Mark, a paraplegic in a wheelchair, is seated in a restaurant with his wife, Ann. The waitress comes to take their order and asks Ann, "What would he like to order?"

This example illustrates the attitude that because Mark is in a wheelchair he is helpless, unable to talk, or order his dinner for himself. The situation may be complicated by the fact that the waitress feels uncomfortable with Mark and his chair, therefore she closes the line of communication with him by talking with his nondisabled wife. This kind of attitude can be insulting and frustrating. Imagine how you would feel if this happened to you. The important thing to remember here is that just because a disabled person is with someone else, that the companion is usually not an attendant, but a friend or business associate. The waitress's reaction created distance and discomfort for Mark and his wife in what should have been a pleasant social situation.

Mary is a blind woman married to a man in the Army. She has raised three children while moving from one Army post to another. John, her husband, was required to travel frequently and has had two years of hardship duty away from home. They are now getting divorced and the court announces that since Mary is blind she cannot possibly take care of children. John gets custody of the three children.

Many courts have ruled that disabled persons are unable to care for their children, even in cases such as this where it is obvious that Mary has been a good mother for several years. In fact, many persons with disabilities have families, actively participate in community and school activities, cook and keep house, just as nondisabled persons do. It is clear that the judge's decision in this case was based on Mary's *dis*ability, and not on her *abilities* to be a competent parent. The barrier here is that the judge did not treat the case with equal justice. Because of her blindness, Mary was automatically discriminated against, and the case was not judged on the normal pros and cons of custody.

Judy has just applied for an executive position. She is extremely well qualified, but is never in serious contention. The position requires heavy use of the telephone and the interviewer automatically excludes her, since a deaf person cannot communicate by phone.

Here, again, the interviewer concentrated on Judy's disability rather than on her ability. Many jobs which are automatically determined to be inappropriate for disabled people can be modified to suit the disabled employee. The interviewer in this case had a number of job adaptations to choose from which were not considered. For example, modification of the job duties may be made, whereby another employee could cooperate with Judy to do the necessary telephone work. Federal law now requires many employers to make "reasonable accommodation" to a person's disability. The attitudinal barrier that the interviewer illustrated was one of fear and discomfort with Judy's disability. The interviewer assumed that, because of Judy's deafness, the job could not be done. Instead, the interviewer should have asked Judy what kinds of modifications could be made in the job. Most disabled applicants would be happy to discuss job adaptations with their potential employer.

Cindy, at 13 years old, is very curious about boys. She is talking with her mother about a cute boy in class. Her mother responds by saying that someday a very special man will come along and like Cindy, even if she does have cerebral palsy. Who knows? He might even marry her. Then Cindy's mother goes on to say that boys aren't important. Developing the mind will be more helpful than worrying about boys.

This situation illustrates two common attitudinal barriers. First, that individuals with disabilities need to be protected from reality; and second, that it is unhealthy for disabled people to be interested in sexual relationships. Cindy's mother is making several potentially damaging statements here. She is inferring to Cindy that her disability is so repugnant that only an extraordinary person could love or marry her. This concept might greatly influence Cindy's self-image as being desirable and attractive at a very crucial point in her sexual development. Let's face it—teenagers have enough self-doubt and worries without having them reinforced by their parents. Cindy's mother is also closing off communication with Cindy about boys by telling her that developing her mind is much more important than developing relationships with boys. Cindy was expressing a normal, healthy interest in the opposite sex—a subject which is *very* important to folks Cindy's age. Her mother rejected this topic as being unrealistic, for she has not come to terms with the fact that persons with disabilities are sexual people. Cindy's mother has a responsibility, as do all parents, to provide sexual guidance and information and to help to affirm her daughter's normality and attractiveness at this formative time in Cindy's life.

David has been an occasional patron of The Coconut, a bar and discotheque, where he goes to socialize and meet potential dates. David, who uses a wheelchair, asks The Coconut's owner to build a ramp so that he can get in and out unassisted. The owner refuses, telling David that he should come to the bar with a friend or, if that's impossible, that any of The Coconut's management staff would be willing to help David inside.

Many of you may feel that The Coconut's owner is being very reasonable in his attitude toward David's patronage and that his offer of help is a generous one. The owner's logic is that the management staff is already paid to accommodate the customers, and the cost of a ramp is probably prohibitive. But what does the prospect of being accompanied and carried in and out do for David's independence and the image of him that is presented to the other customers? Being constantly aided depicts David as being helpless and sets him apart from the other customers, immediately upon his entrance to the bar. David has finally worked through his own fear of appearing alone in public, only to find that wherever he goes he must submit to being treated differently—his disability being the first thing people notice. In fact, the cost of a ramp is usually quite low or the use of another accessible entrance is usually not prohibitive. The costs involved are small in comparison to David's loss of self-esteem and in terms of the extra business generated by The Coconut's accessibility. A facility which is accessible to disabled persons is more usable by *all* persons.

WHEN YOU MEET A DISABLED PERSON...

1. Offer help but wait until it is accepted before giving it. Offering assistance to someone is only polite behavior. Giving help before it is accepted is rude. It can sometimes be unsafe, as when you grab the arm of someone using a crutch and the person loses his balance.

2. Accept the fact that a disability exists. Not acknowledging a disability is similar to ignoring someone's sex or height. But to ask *personal* questions regarding the disability would be inappropriate until a closer relationship develops in which personal questions are more naturally asked.

3. Talk directly to a disabled person, not to someone accompanying them. To ignore a person's existence in a group is very insensitive and it is always rude for two people to discuss a third person who is also present.

4. Don't park your car in a parking place which is specially designated for use by disabled people. These places are reserved out of necessity, not convenience. Some disabled people cannot walk distances, others need extra space in order to get wheelchairs in and out of the car. If you park in a handicapped space it may be convenient for you but totally prohibiting for disabled people.

5. Treat a disabled person as a healthy person. Because an individual has a functional limitation does not mean the individual is sick. Some disabilities have no accompanying health problems.

6. Don't assume that a lack of response indicates rudeness. In some cases a disabled person may seem to react to situations in an unconventional manner or may appear to be ignoring you. Consider that the individual may have a hearing impairment or other disability which may affect social or motor skills.

7. Keep in mind that disabled people have the same activities of daily living as you do. Many persons with disabilities find it almost impossible to get a cab to stop for them or to have a clerk wait on them in stores. Remember that disabled individuals are customers and patrons, and deserve equal attention when shopping, dining, or traveling.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Contact your community facilities (churches, lodges, restaurants, clubs) regarding making the facility more accessible to disabled people (e.g., building ramps, installing raised numbers in elevators, having a sign language interpreter).

2. Include disabled employees on planning committees for office picnics, parties, and other events so that social functions will be for all.

3. Include disabled citizens on task forces dealing with community planning (transportation, building, zoning) so that the community will meet the needs of all citizens.

4. Encourage community groups (Kiwanis, Lions, Jaycees) to have programs about disabled people. Make sure that disabled people are included in the planning and presentation of the programs.

5. When you see a television show portraying disabled people "like everyone else," write a complimentary comment to the producer and to the station carrying it.

6. When you read or view a presentation portraying disabled people in a negative or condescending way (sick, hostile, maladjusted, nonproductive), write a letter stating your opinion to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.

7. Answer children's questions about disabled people. Questions are very normal. Remember that children get their information and attitudes from you.

8. If a disabled person asks for help and you want to help but do not know how, ask the disabled person the best way of giving assistance.

9. If a disabled person feels he can do something but you cannot understand how (e.g., job requirements, whitewater rafting), *ask* the person to explain.

10. Establish communication with disabled people. Often this can be as simple as using a pencil and paper along with speech, if a person is deaf.

11. Include employees with disabilities in planning and policy making within your business or professional organizations.

This is the first in a series of booklets on attitudinal barriers to disabled citizens. It is a publication of the Barrier Awareness Project of the Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers. Project staff includes Sharon Mistler, Debra Cornelius and Susan M. Daniels, Ph D.

Those wishing further information on other booklets are invited to contact the project.

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